

In brief

Doctors demand 14% rise: The BMA has called for a 14% pay increase for doctors to recognise the shortage of doctors and the increasing demands facing the profession. In its evidence to the doctors' and dentists' review body for the 2001 award the BMA says that a 6% increase is necessary to maintain the profession's position, with a further 8% to make up the slippage that has occurred since 1995.

Incidence of BSE underestimated in France: Preliminary findings from a programme that was started in France in July to screen 40 000 cows for bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE) has discovered an incidence of about 1.5 to 2 sick animals per 1000. The findings, published in *Le Figaro*, suggest that the incidence in France has been underestimated.

UK royal colleges rejoin JCC: The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, which represents 18 colleges and faculties in the United Kingdom, has rejoined the Joint Consultants Committee, and both have agreed that there should be a review of the JCC. The academy suspended membership after the vote of no confidence in the General Medical Council passed by the senior hospital staffs conference (17 June, p 1621).

Dutch government pours money into tackling waiting lists: Health care in the Netherlands will receive an extra 3.7bn guilder (£1bn; \$1.4bn) in 2001, a 5% increase, more than twice that originally planned. Three quarters is to reduce waiting times and pressure on staff, largely through recruitment. The health minister, Els Borst, said that a "new élan" was needed from everyone in health care.

England provides £100m (\$140m) for dentistry: The UK government has announced the allocation of £100m to ensure that everyone has access to a NHS dentist in England. Dentists who work primarily for the NHS will receive a financial reward and there are plans for a £35m revamp for surgeries.

FDA declines to lift ban on homosexual men as blood donors

Deborah Josefson *San Francisco*

An advisory panel of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has narrowly voted to maintain the ban on blood donations from homosexual men. The vote was 7-6 to maintain the ban. Under the FDA's rules, men cannot give blood if they have had sex with another man at least once since 1977.

The FDA was considering changing the blood donation rule to ban only men who had had sex with another man within the past five years. The rule came into force originally in

1985 to protect the blood supply from HIV.

Critics claim that the ban is discriminatory and outdated, as other high risk groups such as prostitutes, intravenous drug users, and promiscuous heterosexuals are deferred from donation only one year from their last high risk encounter.

Moreover, more sensitive HIV screening tests are used now than when the rule was initially formulated. Since blood and blood products are in short supply, many favour lifting the

ban. An estimated 62 300 homosexual men would donate blood if the ban were lifted, according to the FDA. About 8% of the US male homosexual population is HIV positive.

The issue has polarised the nation's blood banks, with half supporting easing the policy even more—to one year instead of five—and the other half, including the American Red Cross, opposing any change.

Even with the current restrictions, blood screening is imperfect. Of 12 million units of donated blood each year, 10 HIV infected units slip through, accounting for two to three cases of donor transmitted HIV infections a year. (See p 772, Medicine and Media.) □



South African leaders come under pressure to admit HIV/AIDS link

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

The South African government has run into further difficulties over its attitude towards the HIV and AIDS epidemic and its refusal to admit that HIV leads to AIDS.

The health minister, Dr Man-to Tshabalala-Msimang, recently circulated among her officials a chapter from a book that suggested that AIDS had been started by a world conspiracy of the "Illuminati"—a fictitious group, supposedly made up of Jews, bankers, and communists. It was then revealed that the author of the book, William Cooper, had close ties with the Ku Klux Klan.

In taking up this issue on his radio show, broadcaster John Robbie found himself in an acrimonious argument with the



Dr Tshabalala-Msimang: circulated work of author with ties to Klu Klux Klan

minister, who would not state that HIV lead to AIDS. An exasperated Mr Robbie ended the call, dismissing the minister's comments as a "load of rubbish."

The position worsened for the government when the ruling African National Congress asked the radio station for Mr Robbie's dismissal, threatening the station with sanctions if it would not agree. The owners of the radio station apologised.

The government landed in further trouble when a document

from within the ruling African National Congress became public which made it clear that its members were beginning to question the view of President Thabo Mbeki that HIV does not lead to AIDS. It showed that members had demanded that he state clearly that HIV leads to AIDS and begin treating the problem.

Cabinet ministers last week found themselves questioned aggressively by the press at a briefing session in parliament on their beliefs on the causal link between HIV and AIDS. Only one minister—the labour minister—said he thought that there was one.

This week the health minister found herself engaged once again in the same circuitous debate with reporters, and she refused to state her belief in the link.

Meanwhile President Mbeki faced a major battle with the trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions. He was told that the federation was in no doubt that HIV leads to AIDS and they wanted him to acknowledge this. (See p 772, Medicine and Media.) □